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Nurse the first to map chronic heart failure

A nurse has developed the only national map of chronic heart failure management programs around Australia with the National Institute of Clinical Studies (NICS) and The Heart Foundation.

Robyn Clark, a critical care nurse from South Australia, was one of the first four scholars awarded a scholarship from NICS four years ago and is the first to have completed her project, in February.

Working together with Dr Andrea Driscoll, from Deakin University who surveyed all the heart failure services in Australia in 2004, the two nurses found of 62 chronic heart failure (CHF) management programs, none were in the Northern Territory or Tasmania. Most were on the Eastern seaboard with a sprinkling in South Australia and Western Australia, Robyn said.

Only four were in rural areas and none in remote communities. "We found disproportionate access for people with heart failure. We found only 8% of rural and remote areas were capturing patients with heart failure who had been discharged from hospital," Robyn said.

Only 3% of patients with CHF in rural and remote areas were receiving care in line with gold-standard practice. "Australia has vast geographical expanses. People who live outside capital cities do not have the same access to health care services because most of the people live in capital cities," Robyn said.

The data showed a higher proportion of patients with CHF in rural and remote communities than in the cities. "The population tends to be younger in the cities. Older people tend to move out of the city to quieter areas for retirement," Robyn said. This includes people living on the outskirts of capital cities, still many kilometres from the city centre.

It is estimated that 500,000 people in Australia suffer from chronic heart failure, with almost one third in remote areas. Robyn said she planned to map health services for patients with all cardiovascular disease in rural and remote communities, including heart attack, stroke and angina.

"We first wanted to show there was a clear deficit of services for people with chronic heart failure in rural and remote communities. If this is

happening in chronic heart failure we would like to see what is happening for all cardiovascular conditions."

"We want to see what services are available to people in all 11,300 of Australia's population centres, this includes stations and Indigenous communities without infrastructure, such as a post office. How readily available are services? Do towns have nurses with critical care skills and an airstrip? What is the amount of time it takes to get to a person who is having a heart attack? Is it within three minutes and the golden hour for treatment?"

Mapping health services provides data to see what can be done to bridge the gap in services for patients in rural communities, including the use of both simple and complex technology, Robyn said.

Robyn's project included evaluation of the Chronic Heart Failure Assistance by Telephone (CHAT) program. CHAT is a general practice based, nurse coordinated telephone support for patients with CHF. "Home visits by a health professional reduce readmission by 25%. Where distance makes a home visit impossible, the CHAT program



Robyn Clark

Photo courtesy: NICS

shows great potential for using technology to deliver specialist care."

Further technology could be used to provide education and support for people with chronic diseases in rural and remote areas, Robyn said. "We could have patients turning on their TV to put in their blood pressure and weight for the day and given personalised messages; mobile phone reminders for medication and appointments; and telephone coaching, such as with statins and QUIT smoking. Systematic reviews have shown these are effective."

Practice nurse scholarships

Practice nurses and Aboriginal health workers have until the end of this month to apply for scholarships worth up to \$10,000.

Federal government funding has been made available for scholarships for one in 12 practice nurses, a total of 520 across Australia.

The 2007 practice nurse scholarship and postgraduate scholarships range from \$1,500 for continuing education to

\$10,000 for a postgraduate program of between one and four years' study.

The scholarships cover courses in immunisation, wound management, diabetes, chronic disease management, mental health, asthma, cardiovascular care, obesity and clinical assessment.

New areas of study include women's health, sexual and reproductive health and clinical skills.

The scholarships are administered by the Australian Practice Nurse Association (APNA) and are open to all registered nurses working as practice nurses and Aboriginal health workers currently working in a general practice environment.

Applicants must be an Australian or New Zealand citizen living in Australia. Accommodation and travel expenses will be provided as

part of the scholarship for nurses and Aboriginal health workers in rural and remote locations. Scholarships can be awarded for courses that started from 1 July 2007.

Applications close 28 September. Forms and more information are available from the Australian Practice Nurse Association on 03 9614 7777 or the APNA website (www.apna.asn.au).

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